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The sea serpent: a geographical metaphor for thinking about the procrastination of development projects

The sea serpent: a geographical metaphor for the postponement of development projects

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Summaries

French English
The great "sea serpent" is a creature today considered mythical, at the origin of an expression agreed to describe a hackneyed subject. This expression is particularly used in the context of unfinished development projects, and is therefore under the pen of many geographers. In this article, we propose to enrich this metaphor from a work of genealogy of the expression "sea serpent", then to put these results in dialogue with the concept d' "foam" of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk and the concept of "spheres of conflict" by the French geographer Lionel Laslaz.

The great “sea-serpent” is a mythical creature whose frequent appearances throughout the centuries gave birth to a French colloquialism, a “sea-serpent” being a thing that is often talk about but rarely really seen. It is particularly employed in cases where a project, such as the construction of a road or a building, is perpetually delayed for material or political reasons. In this article, we provide a genealogy of that French expression, in order to explore the heuristic possibilities of the “sea-serpent”; we then try discuss those possibilities through Peter Sloterdijk's concept of “foam” and Lionel Laslaz's concept of “conflictual spheres”.

Index entries

Keywords: geography of conflicts, scales of conflict, layout, media, cryptozoology, sea serpent, metaphor
Keywords: conflict geography, scales of conflict, planning, media, cryptozoology, sea snake, metaphor

Full text

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Introduction

1 The metaphor of the "sea serpent" in the context of planning conflicts or political debates commonly designates a project regularly brought up to date without its seriousness being attested, and the conditions for its feasibility being met. The *Robert* online offers a suc ?? cincte definition: "rebeaten theme". The *Larousse* online, more talkative, offers: "banal subject, cliché which comes back into the news at times when it is little four ?? nie". This article aims to distance these different meanings, and to propose, based on genealogy work and theoretical discussion, a geographical definition of the metaphor of the "sea serpent".

2 Metaphor is a figure of speech which uses a concrete term in an abstract context and whose understanding comes from an analogy. The humanities and social sciences have used it to represent complex models in the form of concrete abstraction (Coenen-Huther, 2000). For example, the legacy of the Chicago School is "fed by two creative metaphors, that of urban ecology and that of urban scenes, which experienced separate destinies" (Sénécal, 2007, p. 529). Geographical space itself could be considered "as a metaphor for the relationships between phenomena on the surface of the Earth" (Torricelli, 1987, p. 141), such a meaning making metaphor a language process conducive to geographical discoveries and geography a discipline expressed by means of an openly metaphorical discourse. Extending Foucault's observation – "Space is in today's language the most obsessive of meta ?? phores" (Foucault, 1994, p. 407) –, Y. Calbérac (2018) argues that only spatial metaphors allow us to theorize space. Indeed, metaphors are not content to be rhetorical and poetic figures; they permeate our ways of thinking and communicating. Certainly meta ?? phores thrive on human imagination and only mean indirectly, and must therefore be used, in a scientific context, sparingly (Passeron, 2000), but they have the great merit of relating cognition, language and reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1986).

3 Asserting itself as one of the major symbols of the human imagination, the snake readily lends itself to metaphors. If Bachelard (1948) considers the snake as a natural image, it is precisely because it is mobilized "in the simplest literary act: in metaphor" (p. 262). Similarly, Durand (1969) emphasized the tenacity and versatility of Ophi ?? dian symbolism. It nevertheless manages to bring together the numerous meanings around three directions, namely temporal transformation, fertility and ancestral sustainability. Furthermore, the phrase "sea serpent" juxtaposes two particularly dense figures of the imagination: on the one hand the serpent which is "the most terrestrial of animals" (Bachelard, 1948, p. 262) and on the other hand the sea and its unfathomable immensity.

4 To clear this vast polysemous field, the proposed definition of the "sea serpent" which we are trying to arrive at is therefore nourished primarily by work on the genealogy of the sea serpent, in order to reconstruct its evo ?? lution from the status of 'scientific object

towards the status of literary expression. This genealogy allows, through contextualization, to grasp the specificity of the contemporary use of expression. Genealogy, in the social sciences, is a method used since the 19th century century by philosophers, like Nietzsche and his G*enealogy of morality* (1887), and brought up to date during the second half of the 20th century century, notably by Foucault (1961) and Veyne (1971). G. Latour (2016) offers a definition of genealogy in five concepts: the historicization of the present, the search for origins, the critical character of the approach, context through the event and a particular literary style. In other words, genealogy aims, through historical reconstruction, to denaturalize a social fact by showing its inscription over a long time and, consequently, the contingency of the forms it takes: thus of the prison system studied by Foucault (1975), whose genealogy makes it possible to deconstruct the historical importance in the management of crime.

5 Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche's method, such a genealogical approach seeks less the causal sequence of historical facts than the relationships of meaning capable of revealing a founding image. We will show, thanks to our genealogy of the sea serpent, how it, integrated into the knowledge of zoologists during the Renaissance following the publication in 1555 of a work on the countries of the North by a Swedish archbishop, Olaus Magnus, suffered a reversal of its ontological condition in the 19th century century, during which the sea serpent is projected outside the scientific field and integrated into the register of journalistic vocabulary.

6 Once this reconstruction has been carried out, we propose a discussion of the concept of "sea serpent" with the thoughts of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who develops in his trilogy *Spheres* (2002; 2005; 2010) a spatialized and scalar thought of the social fact, structured around the concepts of "bubbles", "spheres" and d'" foam", and the French geographer Lionel Laslaz, who offers an analysis of environmental conflicts in prism of the notion of "spheres of conflict" (2016).

7 The purpose of this reconstruction and discussion is to establish a definition of the sea serpent as a discursive fact. It aims to push to the limit the "conceptual metaphor" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1986) of the sea serpent and to get it out of the indeterminacy in which its permanent use in journalistic discourse places it in order to make it an operational concept of geographical discipline.

8 The reconstruction of the history of the sea serpent was carried out from documentary queries carried out on *Gallica* and recent works devoted to the possibility of its existence, mainly from cryptozoolo ?? gic studies. *Gallica* returns 3,434 documentary occurrences of the phrase "sea serpent", the majority of which are in the press (n=1,798) and in books (n=1,631). The study of their publication dates over the long term seems not very per ?? tinent, to the extent that it would reflect less the evolution of the presence of the sea serpent than the increasing digitization of historical documents on Gallica.

9 This first corpus is supplemented by a more recent corpus which aims to allow the identification of the contemporary place of the sea serpent in journalistic language. This corpus was obtained via database querying *Europresse* regarding the National Generalist Press and the Regional Generalist Press, via a query targeting articles that include the expression "sea serpent", from which articles relating to similarly called Medi ?? terranean animals have been removed (n =2). This corpus is limited, due to the unequal digitization of documents prior to 2000, to articles published between 2000 and 2023 (n =17,111), and, as part of a more detailed analysis of the use of expression "sea serpent", to articles published between February and August 2023 (n =328). This corpus covers 12 national press titles, such as *The world* or *Le Figaro*, and 35 regional press titles, like *West France* or *Progress*.

10 Finally, an additional request was made on the site *Cairn.info* in order to study the presence of the sea serpent in geographical language. This request was limited to journals

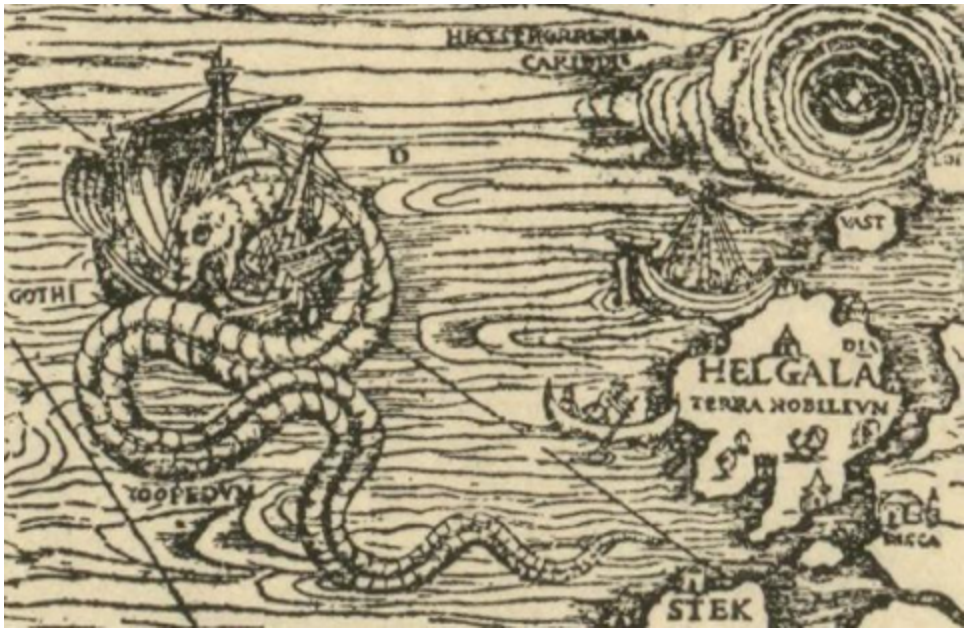
labeled "Geography" and articles containing the expression "sea serpent" (n =71), published in the last ten years.

A genealogy of the sea serpent

From the sea monster as an aesthetic motif to the zoological sea serpent

11 The first traces of the sea serpent, as a particular figure in the bestiary of sea monsters, are only truly encountered during the Renais ?? sance and at the time of the development of modern cartography. Indeed, on the portulans of the late Middle Ages, if the interior is enriched with illustrations, the seas are mainly occupied by wind lines. However, in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the portulans "opened to the powers of poetry"; "abstract at the start, the por ?? tulans will be enriched [...] with an iconography which still makes us dream today" (Lestrigan, 2014). With the gradual disappearance of portulans in favor of cartography based on coordinate systems, the development of specific works including port plans and coastal routes (Akerman, 2006) and the demands for printed cartography intended for an urban and erudite public, maritime spaces now present themselves as a void to be filled.

Figure 1 – Extract from the *Carta Marina* by Olaus Magnus, completed in 1539



National Library of France, Maps and plans department, GE D-21806. (gallica.bnf.fr/BnF)

12 It is with the publication and distribution, in printed form (Whitfield, 1996), of the *Carta Marina* from the Swedish Archbishop Olaus Magnus (figure 1), completed in 1539, and his *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, set of stories on the habits and customs of Northern Europe published in 1555, that the figure of the sea serpent stands out within the imagination of sea monsters. A short chapter is devoted to him, in which we read that along the coast of the Berguen Sea, he locates rocks and caves, being there near a serpent, which is two hundred feet long or more, and twenty thick, which comes out at night in the moonlight [...] to eat polyps, locusts and other kinds of marine fish and dunces (p. 258). It is interesting to note that one of Olaus Magnus' aims in writing this work is to attract the attention of the Roman authorities in the hope of military intervention, Olaus Magnus

then being exiled from a country which had embraced the pro ?? testing Reformation (Johanesson, 1991). Thus, from its birth, the sea serpent was intended to arouse interest and even political commitment.

From zoological fact to news item

13 In the 18th centurye century, the sea serpent continues to be an object of scientific debate among naturalists, and to represent an appreciated aesthetic motif, which participates in the constitution of the modern imagination of the North Seas, populated "by sea monsters, all more awful each other" (Reneteaud, 2016). The *Mercury* reported in 1722 that in Moscow, the sea serpent was part of the carnival, in the form of an enormous collective disguise. The waters generally host a whole population of monstrous creatures, often unique, such as the tarasque in Tarascon or the machecroute in Lyon (Prajoux, 1909). These monsters put some classic binarisms to the test, inviting themselves into the struggle between the dead and the living, winter and spring, domestic and savage.

14 On the side of scholars, the reality of the sea serpent was confirmed by Hans Egede in 1763, a Danish missionary who reported in his *Description and natural history of Greenland*, his encounter with a sea serpent, and by Erik Pontoppidan, Swedish bishop who published between 1752 and 1753 a *Natural history of Norway*. In France, in 1766, compiler Jacques-Phillibert Rousselot de Surgy described the sea serpent as a terrible animal particular to the North Seas. It always stands at the bottom of the waters, except in the months of July and August, when it spawns (p. 81).

15 It's in the 19th centurye century that the existence of the sea serpent is called into question, after an intense period of interest in its existence between 1817 and 1837, due to a series of observations on the coasts of the United States. The *Gold Coast Journal* (October 11, 1817) reports: The American newspapers are filled with disputes over an enormous sea serpent, 100 feet long [...] some of these papers regard this story as a mystification, while others assure positively that the monster exists. The 1817 apparition moved the sea serpent's habitat from Norway to the Atlantic, and is now known as the "Gloucester Sea Serpent" (Massachusetts).

16 The appearance led to the establishment of a commission of the Linnaean Society of New England. This commission produced a press release, published in 1818 in the *Journal of Physics, Chemistry, Natural History and the Arts*, in which we regret that no naturalist was able to observe the ser ?? pent, and that if an animal was indeed observed off the coast, it remains to be proven that it is a sea serpent. The details of the testimonies are recorded and reported with the precision of zoologists' vocabulary: "its total length was 2 feet 11 inches ½ (English measurement); the head was 1 3/10 inches; the trunk, from the nape of the neck to the anus, 2 feet 2 4/5 inches, and the tail only 7 2/5 inches (p. 298).

17 In subsequent years, new appearances are reported, at intervals of one or two years. One of the last to make a big splash was that of July 1837, by the ship's passengers *Le Havre* : the testimony of a French voya ?? ger is then published in *The Le Havre Journal* (July 24, 1837) and reproduced in the rest of the press. That year, the newspaper *The Press* (August 5, 1837) notes ironically: "We think we must tell you what the great sea serpent is. The great sea serpent was invented in 1827 by *Le Figaro*, not knowing how to fill his columns [...] since that time, he has reappeared once a year; and there is no reason for it to cease publication, as long as there are embarrassed newspapers. Similarly, the following year, we read in *The Binocle* (may 6, 1838): The more impossible, unheard of, absurd the duck, the more reasons it has to be well received [...] who did not read, devour, during the Restau ?? ration the famous bulletins of *grrrrand* sea serpent? ".

18 Gradually it is *The Constitutional* who is credited with inventing it, particularly by the conservative right, as the newspaper gained prominence in the years before the 1848

revolution. In 1848, during the revolts, a print represented various sovereigns, including the Emperor of Austria, the Tsar, Frederick William IV of Prussia and Ferdinand II, King of Naples, facing the appearance of a serpent of sea of a new kind: freedom (figure 2).

Figure 2 – Print from 1848 combining political news and the sea serpent news item

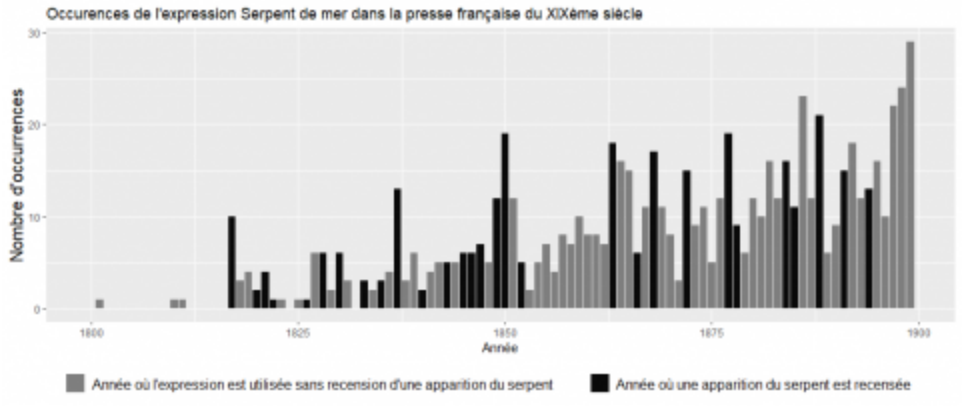
(Aubert et Cie. Source: gallica.bnf.fr /BnF)

19 At the end of the first half of the 19th centurye century, the sea serpent is recognized as a literary invention, emblematic of the Restoration and the July Monarchy, and the development of the tabloid press and "ducks", inexpensive newspapers reputed to be filled with false and touting information.

20 This media sequence can be studied over the long term (figure 3). We observed, between 1817 and the beginning of the 1850s, a period of almost constant interest in the sea serpent, which corresponded first to the period of its taking seriously by the scientific community and the press, then to the period of his ridicule. The periods of use of the expression are, initially, systematically linked to a reported appearance of the snake. After a phase where it became more discreet during the 1850s, the sea serpent made regular appearances again, which however no longer seemed to have any effect on the use of the expression "sea serpent", testimony to its perpetuation in journalistic language.

21 Reading the corpus, it is obvious that the only apparitions really taken seriously are those from the decades 1810-1830. After that, the sea serpent's men ?? tions become mostly ironic, with rare exceptions. We must also be careful not to spontaneously see in the increase in the number of mentions proof of a popularization of the expression "sea serpent", but rather a sign of the increase in print runs and their better numbering in the database of data *Gallica*.

Figure 3 – The presence of the sea serpent in journalistic language in the 19th century century



(gallica.bnf.fr /BnF)

22 The demystification of the sea serpent is not uniform in its historical and geographical development. Some newspapers continue to mention the upcoming confirmation of the existence of the great sea serpent; These are either tabloid magazines which still report each supposed appearance, or Catholic-colored magazines where the sea serpent is announced as the scientific confirmation of the existence of the biblical Leviathan. Thus the monarchist Adrien Peladan devotes an article in *Literary, artistic, scientific France* (August 20, 1864) to the sea serpent and the links which unite it with Leviathan; he sees in the "skepticism" of the scientific community proof of the too great obsession of the times for "material proof". The entry of the sea serpent into the register of the marvelous therefore allows its recovery by critical actors in the academic world, which partly explains the aura of mystery with which it adorns itself.

Birth of an expression

23 Although apparitions were still reported after the 1840s, the sea serpent gradually acquired a reputation as a myth good for ducks. We believe in the sea serpent, or we don't; but from the 1840s, the laughing people were on the side of the unbelievers, as was the scientific community.

24 Within the scientific community, a *Bulletin of the Geography Society* (1er july 1855) thus refers the sea serpent to the side of "the inhabitants of the moon" and "talking tables" (p. 136-137). At the end of the 19th centurye siècle, Oudemans (1892) takes stock of the question, strives to place this living being in the system of nature and even gives it the name of *Megophias megophias* (Raf.). The welcome is reserved, as evidenced by the review made of it in *Nature* "It is impossible, however, to consider this laborious tra ?? vail as a scientific treatise, and the author, we hope, will not blame us if we add that it is the last form of work that we would have expected from the pen of the learned director of the zoological gardens of The Hague" (Anonymous, 1893, p. 506).

25 According to B. Cerquiglini, in a column given on *TV5 World*[1], it's from the middle of the 19th centurye century that the "sea serpent" begins to designate, in journalistic language, an underlying possibility, but never realized. His analysis agrees with the chronology reported here, but we can propose a more precise dating. During the 1870s, occurrences of the expression "sea serpent" gradually appeared which related neither to the mythical animal nor to the supposed journalistic hoax, confirming its empowerment as a metaphor. An article by *The independent of the Basses-Pyrénées* note thus (January 7, 1870), regarding a new Italian automobile with performances considered extraordinary: "This is not a sea serpent".[2] In *The XIXe century* (April 21, 1873), we read: "Some newspapers have just launched a "sea serpent" into circulation, including the *Constitutional* will definitely be jealous. They announce the very imminent withdrawal of Mr. Barodet! '[3]. Finally, in one *Annual bulletin of the Norman Geographical Society* (1881): "The Blood Fool's

Relationship[4] is a scientific sea serpent. Metaphorization therefore seems to occur more specifically in the second half of the 19th centurye century, and was definitively recorded in the 1880s.

Animal mythification and trivialization of expression

26 In XXe century, we find the sea serpent at a time when the possibility of its existence is largely discredited, but where it possesses a strong evocative power. The XIXe siècle takes the sea serpent from the regime of zoology to that of rhetoric, but the news items to which it is attached continue to give it an aura of fascination.

27 On the scientific side, during the 20th centurye century, the sea serpent receives little attention other than cryptozoologists and mystery lovers. Among the precursors, like Henri Coupin, who devotes a work to *Eccentric animals* in 1906, the sea serpent was viewed with suspicion, as "in the stories collected, there are obviously some that are invented from scratch, so that we no longer know how to distinguish the real ones from the apocrypha" (p. 250). An original, "Count" Gautron, wrote a work in 1904 entitled *Towards mystery, romantic thesis*, in which he reviews mentions of the sea serpent in Greek and Roman literature. In the sea serpent edi ?? gent, he thinks he will find proof of the existence of the biblical Leviathan, his appearances being intended to give "a strange lesson" to materialists (p. XI).

28 Heuvelmans, founder of the cryptozoological discipline and zoologist of for ?? mation, published a work on the sea serpent in which he argued that it would be several distinct animals, some having since been listed, such as whale sharks, and others still unknown (1965). In XXe century, reports are fewer: Storm (2008) brings in 56, compared to 190 in the 19th centurye century. According to France (2019), the origin of the sea serpent would be anthropogenic: the creatures observed would be sharks to which ropes or floats would have clung, and whose movement would have evoked that of large snakes. This hypothesis is poetic in that it resolutely makes the sea serpent a human invention (and one of the first victims of marine pollution).

29 At the same time, the expression "sea serpent" is spreading in journalistic lan ?? gage. Here we open the study of a second corpus, constituted thanks to the interrogation of the base *Europresse* over the last twenty years, and, for a more precise analysis, over the last six months.

30 There have been 2,836 occurrences of the expression "sea serpent" since 2000 in the national general press (12 titles) and 14,152 occurrences in the regional general press (35 titles), or 16,988 occurrences of the "sea serpent" expression " in 23 years and approximately 61 language appearances of the sea serpent per month.

31 *Europresse* lending itself little to *web scraping*, the choice was made to manually count the occurrences of the last six months to classify them according to a constituted categorization *ad hoc* shown in Figure 4 (in bold, categories representing more than 10% of counts).

32 On the scale of the national press, the sea serpent is eminently political: as evidenced by its presence in articles devoted to "political institutions", "political parties and news", "security" and "international political". Some articles make it their title: "Senatorial: the left and the sea serpent of union" (*L'Humanity*, June 22, 2023); "Cost of utilities: with “Have some for my taxes”, the return of a sea serpent" (*Public Actors*, April 26, 2023).

33 On a regional scale, however, the sea serpent manifests itself in "sport", in politics and, overwhelmingly, in articles devoted to "development". This work, despite the smallness of the sample, highlights the association between the sea serpent and particularly long, expensive or contested projects which are the subject of media monitoring. As for the articles which make it their title, we can read: "The sea serpent of l'*Intermar ?? ché*

Contact resurfaces" (*The Public Good*, May 27, 2023) or "a veritable sea ser ?? pent, the southern ring road resurfaces" (*The Independent*, March 9, 2023).

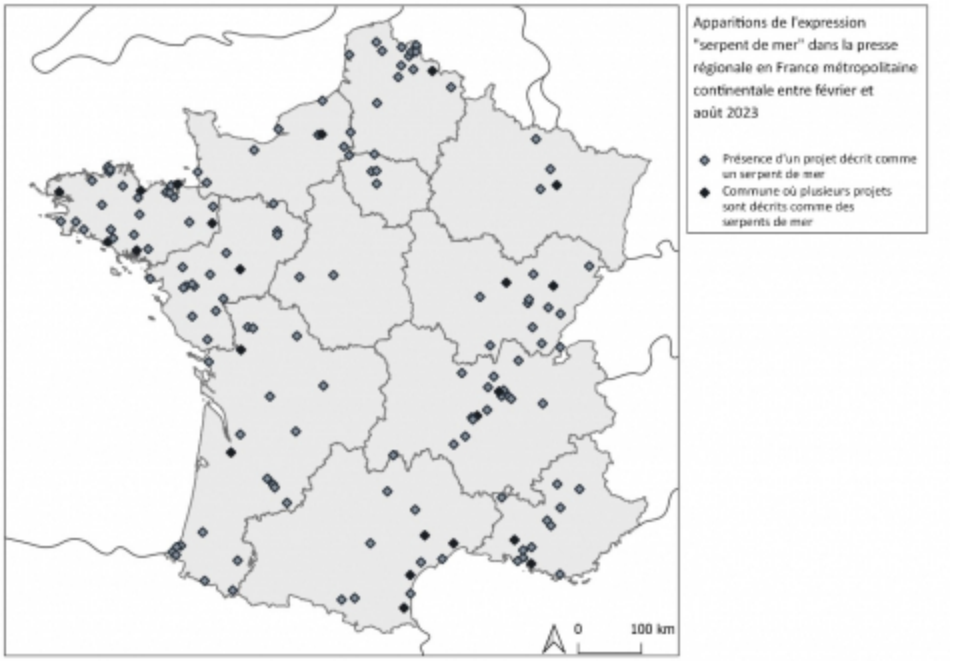
Figure 4 – Categorization of press articles mentioning the sea serpent

Catégorisation des articles dans la Presse Généraliste Régionale (PGR) et Nationale (PGN) employant l'expression "Serpent de mer" entre le 23 février 2023 et le 23 août 2023				
Catégorie	% PGR	Exemple	% PGN	Exemple
Aménagement	43,1	"La mise à 2x3 voies de la rocade bordelaise s'achève, vers la fin des bouchons ?", *Sud-Ouest*, 26 avril 2023	11	"Quand le périph tombera en ruine", *Libération*, 25 mai 2023
Arts et culture	7,1	"Vieilles Charrues : 44 euros la place, jusqu'à quand ?", *Le Télégramme*, 18 juillet 2023	4,1	"Audiovisuel public : le retour de la holding", *Le Monde*, 4 mai 2023
Autres	8,4	"Notre-Dame Libératrice, un joyau en plein cœur de la cité thermale", *Le Progrès*, 19 août 2023	5,5	"En parler ou pas ?", *Le Monde*, 27 mars 2023 [article sur le coming-out homosexuel]
Economie	7,5	"Hôtellerie-restauration au pays-Basque : "Il va falloir faire des choix pour la pérennité de nos entreprises", *Sud Ouest*, 20 mars 2023	9,6	"Etats-Unis : nouveau tour de vis sur les taux", *Le Figaro*, 26 juillet 2023
Environnement	7,1	"L'art de recycler en beauté la laideur de la pollution des océans", *Paris-Normandie*, 27 juin 2023	2,7	"La L.A. River, le fleuve oublié qui fait débat dans la ville du cinéma", *Le Monde*, 9 août 2023
Institutions politiques	11,4	"Raccourcir les vacances scolaires : Emmanuel Macron rouvre le débat", *Midi Libre*, 28 juin 2023	19,2	"Matignon veut rationaliser le petit monde des instituts économiques", *Le Figaro*, 31 mars 2023
Partis et actualités politiques	7,1	"Que va dire Emmanuel Macron ?", *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest*, 22 mars 2023	17,9	"Les Républicains en manque de suite dans les idées", *Aujourd'hui en France*, 3 avril 2023
Politique internationale	1,6	"Vers un accord sur l'asile au sein de l'UE", *Ouest-France*, 10 juin 2023	16,4	"Un sommet pour réinventer les relations Nord-Sud", *Le Monde*, 22 juin 2023
Sécurité	1,6	"Le fichage de l'ADN canin entre en vigueur à Bézier", *L'Indépendant*, 18 juillet 2023	12,4	"Avec 413 milliards d'euros, l'Elysée soigne la défense", *L'Humanité*, 22 mai 2023
Sport	13,3	"La vente de l'ASSE relancée", *Le Progrès*, 26 avril 2023	1,4	"Quel club peut s'offrir la star du ballon rond ?", *Le Figaro*, 14 juin 2023

Source: *Europresse*.

34 Where does the sea serpent reside today? He seems to have found refuge in the columns of *Southwest* (10.1%) and *Progress* (10.6%), but especially d'*West France* (22.3%). Certainly, it therefore still spawns in the Atlantic. A survey of the places described in articles in the regional press as having their sea serpent shows a relatively homo ?? gene distribution, with an appetite for the coasts which must be interpreted less as proof of the warlike character of the inhabitants of the coasts than as that of the taste journalists from *Southwest* and d'*West France* for this expression (figure 5).

Figure 5 – Six months of sea serpent appearances in the regional press


Apparitions de l'expression "serpent de mer" dans la presse régionale en France métropolitaine continentale entre février et août 2023
Présence d'un projet décrit comme un serpent de mer
Commune où plusieurs projets sont décrits comme des serpents de mer
0
100 km

The sea serpent in the geographical discipline

35 Although it has abandoned the white of maps, the sea serpent has not left geographers. A query on *Cairn* limited to the geographical discipline over the last 10 years returns 71

results, which we have categorized through the prism of a created grid *ad hoc*, and from which we have removed the elements resulting from non-scientific work. It appears that the sea serpent frequents work relating to geopolitics (n =24), development and town planning (n =20) as well as the environment (n =19). Here again, he favors investigations into conflict, development projects or diplomatic tensions. The presence of manuals from Armand Colin editions (n =6) (which constitute one of the bases for the training of young geo ?? graphs) and works from the collection *What do I know?* among these references (n =2) must invite us to consider the sea serpent as accustomed to geographical language.

36 The sea serpent therefore suffered a reversal of its position in the rhetorical and zoological fields: considered until the end of the 18th centurye century as a reality about which little is spoken, it became during the 19th centurye century a myth that we talk about a lot. Here we find the symbolism of the tem ?? poreal transformation attached to the snake, "animal which molts, which changes skin while res ?? ting itself" (Durand, 1969, p. 364). At the end of this genealogy which allows us to embrace the diversity of forms taken by the sea serpent, we can now explore its conceptual potential.

Sea serpent, spheres of conflict and foam

37 Here we propose to explore the heuristic interest of the metaphor of the sea serpent, based on the concepts of "sphere" and "scum" by Peter Sloterdijk (2005) and the concept of sphere of conflict by Lionel Laslaz (2005). Using the ideas developed by these two authors, whose work we briefly present, we propose a geographical definition of the sea serpent as encountered in conflict situations.

Spheres and foam at Sloterdijk

38 Sloterdijk is an author whose reception in geography remains to be done, despite his presence in the spotlight *Dictionary of Space and Societies* by Lévy and Lussault (2003), and despite the explicitly geographical nature of his theory and his constant concern to spatialize the objects he discusses (Garcia, 2016). One of the essential aspects of his thinking is the substitution of the concept of spheres for the concept of society: when we speak, below, of "society", the expression designates neither a monospheric container [...] nor a process of communication not spatial [...] but an aggregate of microspheres of different formats (couples, homes, businesses, associations) which are adjacent like bubbles in foam (*Spheres III*, pp. 51-52). These spheres are fundamentally inscribed in space, which they form as much as they are formed by it.

39 Sloterdijk develops his thoughts along a trilogy of works, numbered with *Spheres I* to *Spheres III*, which is organized according to a scalar logic (Régnauld, 2011): *Bubbles, microspherology* (2002), *Globes, macrospherolo ?? gia* (2010) and *Scum, plural spherology* (2005). If the first work is devoted to the analysis of "bubbles", understood as the "microspheres" constituted by "neighborhood", and the second develops an analysis of the world, the "globe", the third work concerns the way in which this, less than a flat expanse, is formed of a vastness of various scales, perpetually recomposed within a "foam", formed by l' "empi ?? lage of spaces" (p. 222). This foam each time produces the space in which it is and which is within it. In the same way that Bruno Latour spoke of a "parliament of things", we want to speak of a "republic of spaces"" (*Spheres III*, pp. 18-19). The world is therefore made up of a mass of compact cells, with thin walls, with perpetually recomposed geography, "anthropogenic islands" whose diversity is threatened by the expansive nature of bubbles, which aim to internalize external bubbles in their breast.

"Polemogeography" and "spheres of conflict"

40 The geography of conflicts or "polemogeography" (Charlier, 1999), as a disciplinary field, has produced over the years a rich lexicon which aims to account for the diversity of the situations studied. This glossary mainly explores three dimensions of conflicts, namely those of space, time and intensity. Here we will focus on the conflict space lexicon.

41 The specificity of geographic analysis is the role given to space in the analysis; otherwise, we more readily speak of a geopolitical approach (Leininger-Frézal, 2016). One of the most used approaches consists of interpreting the conflict as based on a contradiction in the representation that the different actors have of space. For Retailé (2011), which is based on Lefebvrian vocabulary (Lefebvre, 1974), the space of conflict is first of all the place of an opposition between different representations of space (i.e. designed space) which cannot coexist within the same representation space (or lived space). Dziedzicji (2004) speaks of "overlapping" of conflicting dimensions. From this perspective, space informs a conflict which can be of use or "location" (Trudelle, 2003). Darly (2008) takes a further step by emphasizing the morphogenic capacity of the conflict, and the transformation that l' undergoesspace of conflict during it. Controversy can "take place" (November*et al.*, 2004) and strengthen the attachment of populations to it (Sébastien, 2016).

42 The aspect of this academic discussion on which we want to intervene is that of the scales of conflict. Charlier (1999) proposes a typology of conflicts according to their scales, ranging from "micro-conflict" to "macro-conflict", taken up by Lecourt (2003). But we can also question the way in which a conflict, even a very localized one, can summon several scales. Depending on the conflict, the notion of scale allows us to understand the diversity of rationalities of the actors (Facchinetti-Mannone and Bavoux, 2010); and the ability of an actor to deploy on several scales is one of the constituent elements of his power (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977).

43 Laslaz, for his part, proposes the concept of "spheres of conflict" (2016) to help think about the articulation of the different spaces affected, directly or indirectly, by the opposition situation. Around the space concerned by the project, we find the "proximity" sphere, that of immediate space. The second is the sphere of concern, that of the individuals affected by the project. Next comes the sphere of profit-sharing, which is the sphere of people with a strong or weak interest in the situation and who keep abreast of its evolution. Around these spheres, we find the sphere of mobilization, which will encompass individuals in favor of the project or opposed to it; this sphere can be expressed in reticular form, to the extent that opponents of the project can manifest themselves independently of their geogra ?? phic proximity (for example, by relaying information online or traveling from remote locations to support a movement). This concept of "spheres of conflict" seems to us to be able to be brought into profitable contact with the theory of spherical spaces developed by Sloterdijk. The different spheres defined by Laslaz seem to us to participate in a particularly unstable form of foam, whose "conflictual core" (Laslaz, 2015) ensures cohesion and whose disappearance can mean the effon ?? drement of the entire foam – as well. collectives or associations that come and go to fight against a development project. For Laslaz, these different spheres are characterized by three devices which are specific to each: their regulation, their identity and their spatial form (p. 69), which seems to us consistent with the propensity of the bubbles described by Sloterdijk to acquire an "immune constitution" (*Spheres I,* p. 28). The sphere of profit-sharing has its own rules and its own places, which are distinct from those of the sphere of conflict itself: what is acceptable on the site of a future project (degradations, displays) does not is not necessarily outside, even if each of these spheres has a tendency towards expansion.

The scum-producing sea serpent

44 The foam produced by the sea serpent is described as early as the 18th centurye century by Hans Egede, who notes that "he had a long & pointed nose; and he blew like a Whale" (p. 67). In the 19th centurye century, the foam that the snake gives off in its course becomes one of the characteristic features of its identification during its appearances. In an article relating to the American Apparition of 1817, the *Annals of Chemistry and Physics* from the year 1818 report the description of a witness, according to whom the snake "leaves behind it a trail of foam a sixth of a league" (p. 425). Generally speaking, fantastic aquatic creatures are often distinguished by their ability to cause eddies or even floods: Reyt (2000) thus highlighted the close relationships that unite snakes and dragons with rivers. Morphologically, the crawling of these animals recalls the sinuosity of the meanders; dynamically, their excesses echo the extreme phenomena of waterways, notably floods and floods.

45 We propose, based on this characteristic of the snake, the genealogy produced and the concepts borrowed from Laslaz and Sloterdijk, to push to the limit the metaphor of the foam of the sea snake to derive a definition specific to planning conflicts. It is appropriate to underline here the specificity of this definition: it does not aim to exhaust the semantic richness of the sea serpent, but to make geographers sensitive to its use in the context of situations of opposition between actors.

46 A sea serpent is a discursive tool intended to produce foam, that is to say to force the emulsion of the different spheres of a conflict, and whose power decreases over time, as long as the credible testimonies of its existence are lacking. The news of its appearance may aim to ensure the immiscibility of certain spheres or, on the contrary, to encourage the interference of certain bubbles in another sphere. However, the excessive regularity of its appearances mechanically produces a weakening of its capacity to change the situation of the actors in the foam of the conflict.

47 Concretely, within the framework of development projects, the sea serpent aims to make people talk, to mobilize, to interest, to make noise; in its early days, its evocation occupies the media space and can move the lines, in one direction or the other, among actors who were until then indifferent. In this way, it makes it possible to facilitate the "scalar jumps" of the conflict (Laslaz, 2015), that is to say their escalation, literally and figuratively, on larger scales. The evocation of a sea serpent by one of the stakeholders in the conflict aims to widen the bubbles, thanks to its power of fascination: it makes it possible to broaden the sphere of protest (for example by pushing individuals who are then little concerned with positioning themselves) and to further integrate the external spheres.

48 Over time, without new credible evidence of its existence, it loses its capacity to fascinate and interest. For the sea serpent to mobilize again, its appearance must be reported by a witness whose words seem serious, like a major political decision-making figure. In this way, the sea serpent reveals the balance of power and the weight of the words of the actors in the conflict.

49 If we were to go to the end of the metaphor of foam, we would then have to identify the sea serpent as a gaseous agent, introduced into a solid medium whose composition it evolves without altering its continuity. That's what Sloterdijk (*Spheres III,* 2005, p. 23) names "air at an inat ?? tended location": "the supply of air causes a liquid or solid to lose its density. What seemed homogeneous, stable and autonomous is transformed into detached and fragile structures. We must then wait for the intervention of a surfactant, such as the organic film of sea foam, to once again stabilize the boundaries of these spheres. In the context of a development conflict, this stabilizing film may take the form of a press release of denial or confirmation (of the relaunch of a study, of the choice of a site...).

50 The operational interest of this definition seems to us to lie in three points.

51 First, by emphasizing the anthropogenic origin of the sea serpent, it invites us to think of it as a collective construct. Any project perpetually rejected is not necessarily constituted

as a sea serpent: for it to become one, it must be identified as a potential serpent and mobilized as such by an actor in the conflict. Libourel (2019) thus places within the stakeholder games the railway corridor project linking the Mediterranean regions of Spain to the rest of Europe and presents it as a "political sea serpent". If the central state prefers the radials leading to Madrid, local actors defend it before the European Commission. In his article, Libourel thus traces the long history of this snake, mentioned in the 1920s and mobilized successively by actors in agriculture, industry and tourism, then by regional authorities.

52 Secondly, our definition calls for vigilance regarding the political use of the sea serpent, due to its capacity to destructure the balance of the spheres present: it is never agitated unnecessarily. His mobilization in a speech indicates a desire for expansion of the spheres of interest and concern; this expansion can aim to promote a dispersion of spheres (for example by mobilizing a sea serpent for the purposes of diverting media news) or refocusing spheres (to promote the cohesion of actors around common struggles). Rocher (2013) thus described the mobilization of associations and peri-urban municipalities against the "sea serpent on the banks of the Loire" that is the Angers Sud road bypass project. She points out the plurality of positions adopted towards the ring road project by different groups of actors with nuanced argumentatively colored colors through speeches based on varied registers and according to various modalities of alliances. The snake serves here to unite coalitions of actors, temporarily, around a common interest.

53 Third, the definition invites the historicization of sea serpents in pre ?? sence in the space of conflict. Each snake has a more or less long history and more or less appropriated by the different groups of actors, with its periods of appearances and disappearances. Thus Woessner (2019) makes the project to dig a large canal between the Rhône and the Rhine "a sea serpent of regional transport policies". He offers in sequence a chronology of the project from the inauguration of the Rhine-Rhône canal in 1834 to the present day, and notes, not without irony: "in fifty years, the people who lead the debate have succeeded one another, but their arguments vary little". Durand (1969) showed that, in many cultures, the ser ?? pent is the doublet of the moon, since it appears and disappears rhythmically. Likewise, the controversy surrounding a development project follows different stages that form the d' cyclepublic attention to a question (Downs, 1972). The post-problematic stage does not necessarily signify the definitive end of the problem's career. A spark can restart a new cycle. The analogy is vivid between the snake's rings, cycles of attention to a problem, and the number of days of the lunation. Ouroboros, the snake that bites its tail, is the great symbol of the time cycle.

Conclusion

54 The sea serpent has always found its place in the geogra ?? phic discipline. Inherited from the cartographic traditions of the Renaissance, it has survived to the point of integrating the vocabulary of studies devoted to conflict situations. There exists in a form of indefinition which, if profitable from a heuristic point of view, limits its analysis. The definition that we propose, emphasizing the anthropogenic origin of the sea serpent and its political potential, thus makes it possible to promote its distancing.

55 The metaphor of the sea serpent is interesting for understanding development projects which struggle to escape from the virtual mode of existence and fail to access that of things. These projects are facing resistance whose origins can be varied, notably technical, financial, political and even social. Although virtual, this type of project nonetheless exists and does not disappear. Anatomically and dynamically, the sea serpent highlights two characteristics of planning conflicts. First, due to its morphology, the undulations of the sea serpent's body are part of the constellation of sinuous shapes and evoke doubt,

uncertainty and indecision in the course of things, the return of the same or an endless story. Political procrastination prolongs controversies, fuels journalists' chestnut trees and makes certain projects Arlesian: we talk about them a lot, we expect them, but we don't see them and they will never succeed. Secondly, the physiology of the snake which can bite makes it capable of excesses and violence which echo certain regimes of action in conflict situations, such as material damage or physical and verbal attacks. If the snake has symbolized the threats inherent in the little-known spaces of nautical charts, it also embodies the paroxysmal events which disrupt the daily life of the inhabitant communities.

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Notes

1 https://educateurs.lumni.fr/index.php/video/d-ou-vient-l-expression-serpent-de-mer-dans-la-presse#con
tainerType=folder&containerSlug=the-vocabulary-of-media

2 This is probably one of Innocenzo Manzetti's steam cars.

3 Désiré Barodet, opponent of Adolphe Thiers and candidate for deputy in the Seine in 1873.

4 Mythical country described in a Chinese travel report from Ve century.

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	File	image/png, 839k
	Title	Figure 2 – Print from 1848 combining political news and the sea serpent news item
	Credits	(Aubert et Cie. Source: gallica.bnf.fr /BnF)
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/gc/docannexe/image/21868/img-2.jpg
	File	image/jpeg, 245k
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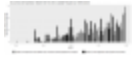	**Credits**	(gallica.bnf.fr /BnF)
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